Sermon on the Mount – Lesson 5
Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

Background

- V.1, Jesus cautions his followers to beware practicing your "piety" before others (NRSV translation. NRSVUE says "righteousness"). The word translated here as "piety" or "righteousness" can also mean "justice." While piety can be our own personal practice, doing justice is community driven. Jesus offers three acts of piety or justice to be practiced – alms, prayer, and fasting.
- The issue here isn't practicing your piety/justice in public, "before others." The issue is doing it "in order to be seen." We should be vocal about justice, peace, and compassion, because we are faithful to God, not so that others will see we are faithful to God.
- V.2-4, The word for "alms" is of the same root as the Greek word for "compassion." Giving is an act of compassion, and our generosity ought to come from the heart, not a desire to be recognized. A hearty, "Well done!" from God is more valuable than having our name listed in a roster of donors or even plastered to the side of a building. Remember, "the meek will inherit the earth."
- V.5-8, prayer. Prayer is an open line of communication between us and the divine. Like a conversation with a trusted friend, we don't need to show off. We aren't trying to impress God with our vast understanding or even deep need. Often the simplest prayers are the best for they speak from the heart. It's communication for the purpose of sustaining and growing our relationship with God.
- This means prayer should be honest. We can express our anger. We can ask why. We can even share our doubts. God can take it, and besides, it's not like God doesn't already know.
- We will look at the Lord's Prayer (v.9-15) in Lesson 6.
- V.16-18, fasting. Giving something up, as some still do in the season of Lent, can help us remember our dependence upon God and the importance of not letting other stuff replace God in our lives.
- Notice how Jesus keeps repeating how those who practice their faith (or piety) just for show "have received their reward" (v.2, 5, &16). On the other hand, give alms, pray, and fast simply out of love of God and God "will reward you" (v. 4, 6, & 18). This is the difference between living in and working toward worldly kingdoms as opposed to the kingdom of heaven.
- Note that the in verses 19-21 Jesus goes on to contrast worldly and heavenly treasures. Those who practice piety just to be seen have chosen one over the other.

Reflection

- How do we keep the balance between practicing our faith publicly while not doing it just to be seen?
- What is your understanding of prayer? Has that understanding changed over your lifetime?
- Jesus says, "…and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." How do you envision God's "reward"?

Summary

Notice how the values of the Beatitudes, such as "the poor in spirit" and "the meek," which open this "sermon" run throughout the whole speech. These practices of charitable giving, prayer, and fasting are central to the Christian faith as we strive to build a deeper relationship with God and discover the kingdom of heaven among us. However, like any practice, they can be done for the wrong reasons. Jesus is calling his disciples to be authentic and keep our lives centered around God above all else.